

CONSIDERATIONS FOR GENDER INTENTIONAL RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION PROCESSES for Professional Development Programs

In creating professional development opportunities, such as training or continuing education, it is valuable to make sure that the professional benefits afforded by these programs do not disproportionately favor men. Equity is important here because many sectors of international development are either male-dominated (e.g. Financial Services, Water, Sanitation & Hygiene) or have gender gaps in leadership, with fewer women rising into higher-level positions. This brief provides recommendations about how to design gender intentional processes for recruitment, application design, and participant selection when creating professional advancement opportunities.

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Gender Intentional Recruitment

An intentional approach to advertising and recruiting for a program can help to ensure that qualified female candidates are aware of the program and motivated to apply. Especially in sectors where women are underrepresented, targeted outreach may be necessary to ensure that enough qualified women hear about the program and apply. For this stage, consider:

The outreach strategies:

- Who is likely to be reached by the channels used to advertise the program (e.g., email list serves, word of mouth, websites)? Are there channels that are more likely to reach women or other underrepresented groups in the sector? Is it feasible to use these channels in addition to or instead of the ones currently in use?
- If there is a nomination process, who is being asked to nominate potential participants? What individuals or groups may potentially be excluded through this approach? What can the program do to encourage the nomination of women?

The language and messaging for advertising and providing information about the course:

- Is the language used to promote the program likely to exclude or to encourage women to apply? Consider which words are used to describe the desired candidates: are they biased towards stereotypically masculine or feminine attributes or behaviors? Select balanced and neutral adjectives when possible.

To motivate women and individuals from other underrepresented groups, include **messaging in the recruitment and application materials encouraging individuals from diverse background to apply**. For example: "Women and other individuals from identities and backgrounds underrepresented in xyz positions/committees/boards are encouraged to apply." Promote an understanding of and support for the importance and value of increasing women's professional engagement and leadership in the sector by **including content both in recruitment materials and course curricula on why gender diversity is important. This also can help mitigate potential backlash around any measures to promote diversity that may be perceived as unfair**.

Gender Intentional Application Design and Selection Processes

Several different approaches to application design and selection processes may be more or less appropriate depending on the context and how they are implemented. A combination of tactics will likely be the most effective way of creating an inclusive process.

Design the application to be streamlined, with minimal requirements, and transparent about selection criteria, including distinguishing between minimum and desired requirements. Such measures may help:

- Encourage women and others who sometimes feel that they shouldn't apply unless they meet all the desired criteria;
- Reduce the number of unqualified applicants who apply, which also helps to minimize rejection and reduces the likelihood that discouraged applicants won't apply for future opportunities¹ (this risk may also be mitigated by providing feedback on the reasons for rejection).²
- Reduce the waste of professional capital expended by applying (e.g., through asking superiors for letters of recommendation). This is particularly important for women, who in many sectors often have less access to professional networks and mentors.
- Reduce the time burden on applicants, recognizing that this supports women, who disproportionately experience time poverty compared to men because they are systematically more likely to take on a higher burdens of unpaid work.

Assess and adjust selection criteria and weighting to reduce inadvertent bias based on existing gender gaps and barriers:

Gender bias and other types of bias can often be reduced by critically examining which admissions criteria may disproportionately favor a certain group of applicants and adjusting as possible to increase the opportunities for individuals from other groups. For example, criteria such as years of experience in leadership positions, or favoring candidates who have received awards/recognition, may inadvertently favor male applicants. Consider which criteria are truly necessary for successful participation in the program and which are "nice to haves" that can be eliminated from the scoring or given a lower weight.

1 Brands, Raina A. & Fernandez-Mateo, I. (2016) Leaning Out: How Negative Recruitment Experiences Shape Women's Decisions to Compete for Executive Roles. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 62, 3. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0001839216682728>

2 Candidates that were qualified but not selected due to a highly competitive process can benefit from knowing they were qualified and encouraged to apply in the future. Those who were not selected due to not meeting the qualifications can benefit from knowing which parts of their application could be strengthened, or if possible what other opportunities may be more appropriate for them.

Consider implementing a quota for the final pool

Specifying a target number or percentage of individuals from a specific group or sub-population is the most straightforward way to achieve gender parity in the final pool. While partners or participants may have concerns about actual or perceived lack of fairness of a quota and there are potential risks of backlash or other unintended consequences,³ there are also many examples where quotas have been successfully implemented to achieve gender parity.⁴ Risks of negative perceptions can be mitigated through communication on the importance of diversity within the targeted programs and professions, and the assurance that the requirements for admission and selection are not eliminated or lowered. Box A provides an example of a partner who used a quota for a foundation-funded scholarship program. Quotas can also be an effective mechanism to increase diversity beyond gender (e.g., geographic diversity) and to ensure the inclusion of individuals who face multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization based on their ethnicity, religion, language, etc.

Conduct blind reviews of applications

Evidence suggests that blind reviews can remove some bias and increase the admission of women or other targeted groups. However, there is also evidence that it does not completely prevent bias because it is often possible for a reviewer to guess the gender of the applicant – even when they are not consciously trying to do so – due to differences in language and style of communication.⁵ This mixed evidence around the extent to which blind reviews reduce the effects of unconscious gender bias in application review and selection processes suggests the need for this measure to be accompanied by additional actions.

Level the playing field for future professional development opportunities: The process of designing the recruitment and admissions process for a capacity building opportunity may reveal gender barriers that the program at hand can't address. Consider investing in further professional development opportunities that aim specifically to address barriers experienced by women (e.g. advancing from early- to mid-career positions, or obtaining leadership positions).

Box A: IHE-Delft Sanitation graduate program

For this graduate program for sanitation professionals from low- and middle-income countries, the foundation WSH team's partner, IHE-Delft, decided to implement a quota with the goal of distributing 50% of the scholarships to women. In the sanitation sector women make up about 20% of the workforce, and they tend to have less experience and occupy lower positions. The partner therefore assessed male and female scholarship applicants separately, after first ensuring that all of them met the minimum criteria for acceptance into the program.

When establishing admissions criteria, for example, IHE included gendered differences in the sector by assessing career plans in addition to years of experience. Knowing that it would be difficult to reach female candidates through their regular communication channels, IHE also intentionally advertised in non-standard publications and tailored the advertising language to emphasize aspects of the course which might resonate with roles women typically have in the sector. The gender quota was met, and IHE was pleased with the results of the final cohort. The classroom experience was improved by the diversity of the group, since different perspectives can contribute to solve common sanitation issues whose solutions are often exclusionary because of a lack of diversity (e.g., gender and background) in design.

IHE has since scaled this strategy through the entire Global Sanitation Graduate School, making it a policy to achieve at least 50% female participants among the 41 Global Sanitation Graduate School member universities in Africa and Asia.

3 In one study, publicizing the implementation of a strict quota led to women being less interested in applying compared to a strategy of affirming a preference for female applicants. See: Nater, C., and Sczesny, S. (2016). Affirmative action policies in job advertisements for leadership positions: how they affect women's and men's inclination to apply. *Eur. J. Soc. Psychol.* 46, 891–902. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.2200

4 E.g. the following examples in university settings:

Brazil: R.S. Vieira, M. Arends-Kuenning (2019). Affirmative action in Brazilian Universities: effects on the enrolment of targeted groups *Econ. Educ. Rev.*, 73, Article 101931, 10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.101931

Sri Lanka: de Silva, T., Gothama, S., & Premakumara, P. (2021). Admissions quotas in university education: Targeting and mismatch under Sri Lanka's affirmative action policy. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT*, 84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102440>

South Korea: President. Park, S. (2020). Seeking changes in ivory towers: The impact of gender quotas on female academics in higher education. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102346>

5 Kolev, J., Fuentes-Medel, Y., & Murray, F. (2019) Breaking Down Bias: Blinded Review and Gendered Language in Innovation. <http://bit.ly/2Y1mLDf>